



GriefCare for Families
Module 4: Caregiving after a loss
Topic 2: Helping grieving children feel safe

Children are built to grow and develop. They thrive when their caregivers help them feel safe – physically, emotionally and socially. The death of someone close makes most adults lose our feelings of safety. We become more aware of the fragility of life. We find emotions are strong, painful and more difficult to manage than usual. The social world changes. We begin GriefCare for Families by suggesting ways you can build your own sense of emotional and social safety so that you can help your children in the best way possible. In other words, we suggest you “put your own oxygen mask on first.” Even as you’re doing that, you can be aware of your child’s social and emotional needs and do your best to attend to them.

It’s natural for children to fear physical harm and to worry about the safety of caregivers after a loved one dies. An important way to help children feel safe is to be sure they understand what happened to their deceased loved one. It’s best for parents and caregivers to be honest and direct and not try to protect their child from the reality of death. Help children to see that death is a natural part of life and losing their special person does not increase the likelihood of their own death or yours.

Explaining death to children

It can be difficult to talk to your child about your loved one’s death. You may be afraid you will be too emotional or you may worry about how this information will affect your child. This is very natural but it’s important to remember that your child needs to know what happened in the most accurate way that they can understand. They need you to provide the information in a way that is factual but not scary. We provide more information in the next module about how you can help children of different ages understand what happened to the person who died.

Children often have trouble understanding what death means. It’s still a good idea to explain it but you can expect your child to be confused and ask the same questions repeatedly. This is not because they aren’t listening and it is not because you’re not explaining things well. Continue with the same answer to your child’s questions. When another adult is confused about something, we try explaining it a little differently in order to provide clarity. With children it’s best to just repeat what we said before. Explaining it differently can be confusing to a child.

Consider beginning a conversation by asking your child what they think it means when someone dies. Be alert for misconceptions that could cause confusion or distress. You want to correct these. It’s important for a child to know that when a person dies they go

away and don't come back. No matter how much we might want the person to come back or how mad we are that they are gone, they can't come back. You can tell them that you are upset that this happened, as well, dying is a natural thing that happens. Ask your child if they understand and ask them to say it back to you in their own words. Gently correct anything they say that is not accurate.

Children think in different ways from adults. They understand things in specific concrete ways rather than in more abstract ways. When adults use abstract language or euphemisms children often take them literally and this can be confusing. Your explanations will be more helpful if you use concrete specific language to help your child understand what it means that their friend or family member died. Remember to keep the lines of communication open by checking back with your child to see how they have understood what you told them.

Another thing you want your child to understand is that living things are special. They are different from things that are not alive like stuffed animals or dolls or other toys. One thing that makes living things special is that they eventually die. All living things die. This is a very natural aspect of life. Explain to your child that Sometimes they pretend that toys are alive, or pretend that they can do things or go places that are not real but pretending is different from reality. You don't want your child to stop pretending but you want them to learn the difference between what really truly happens and what is pretend. It is important for them to understand that dying is something that happens to all living things. Even though it makes us sad we know that it is a natural thing and it is ok. Have patience with your child and remember it is normal for children to be confused about death. Most adults don't fully understand it either.

The role of consistency, structure and boundaries

An important way parents and caregivers help children feel safe is by maintaining consistency in family routines and expectations. Children can thrive when provided rules and limits. It is normal for children to misbehave. However, you need to be clear, firm and consistent about misbehavior even when they are grieving. It's important to understand their grief and avoid being punitive, yet, it's important to immediately address dangerous or destructive behavior.

Grieving children have strong, painful emotions. They might express their emotions in angry or aggressive behavior. It's important for parents and caregivers to continue to respond appropriately to their grieving child, even if they understand that the troubling behavior is a way of expressing grief. Appropriate boundaries are comforting to a child.

Child development experts recommend that parents distinguish between behavior that is obnoxious or annoying from behavior that is dangerous or destructive. The former is best ignored. It might be a signal that a grieving child needs attention and support. Dangerous or destructive behavior might also signal a need for attention and support, however, please remember, threatening behavior should be immediately confronted.

Consistent, appropriate consequences for dangerous or destructive behavior helps children feel secure. Sometimes parents and caregivers feel that grieving children are

going through so much they want to spare them of responsibility to act appropriately. This can be harmful for the child, as it can end up increasing negative behavior and a rise in parenting stress.